

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 25, 2018

Peter O'Rourke
Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. O'Rourke:

We write today to bring your attention to recent reports of violations of the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) eBenefits website and the potential defrauding of veterans of their disability and pension compensation. We believe VA must reexamine its efforts to ensure veterans' information is secure against persistent cyberattacks, how it communicates that information to veterans, and how it ensures employees and contractors follow proper security protocols.

It has recently come to our attention that, over the years, thousands of veterans' eBenefits accounts have been hacked or otherwise improperly accessed. Usually, the wrongdoers alter direct deposit information to steal the veteran's compensation. According to VA, 870 accounts have been compromised so far in 2018. While that is a small number, we must be concerned about the impact on every veteran and family member when they lose even temporary access to their compensation funds. Please confirm the number of eBenefits accounts breached in each of the last four years and the extent to which VA can determine it has awareness of every hacked or improperly accessed account.

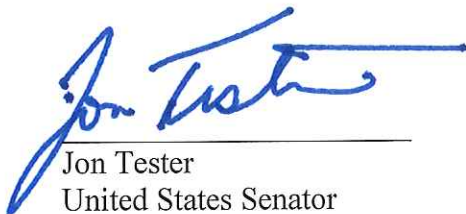
We are also particularly concerned at how VA communicates with veterans and family members about the compromised accounts. If a veteran is lucky, he or she learns of the fraud weeks later when they receive a letter from VA indicating that there was a request to change direct deposit information. At worst, the veteran becomes aware of the change when they do not receive the deposit and are short of funds to pay for housing, food, or medicine. Unfortunately, the veteran must then spend an inordinate amount of time tracking down their old funds, as well as reinstating the proper deposit information. A VAntage blog post from July 10, 2018 discussed actions Veterans Benefits Administration employees can take to help veterans who have had benefits stolen, and while a positive step, we are concerned these procedures are too little, too late.

We urge VA to examine how stricter security protocols and active communications at the point when account information is changed or initiated could limit the harm to veterans and their family members. The Department could consider implementing multi-factor authentication protocols, such as those used by ID.me, which the Department uses for the VA Identification Card enrollment process, or it could examine requiring an individual to call in or acknowledge a phone call to make a significant account change. We urge you to survey veterans and security experts to look for balanced additional security measures.

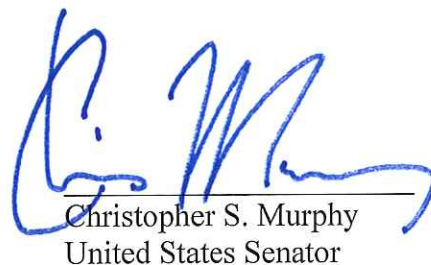
While VA defends itself against cyberattacks and fraudsters, it must also make sure employees and contractors follow procedures. We recently learned that a VA-owned spreadsheet containing sensitive personally identifiable information (PII) such as addresses and Social Security numbers for more than 1400 veterans was sent unencrypted to a personal email address in January 2014. It is deeply concerning VA did not learn about this breach until February 2018. Though the Department claims to have mailed letters to the impacted veterans or next of kin, it is impossible to know just what sort of illegal acts may have occurred utilizing this information in the last four years. Indeed, some veterans may have even had fraudulent VA accounts initiated with this information. Although the Department stated in a 2016 Office of Inspector General report, VA OIG 16-00623-306, that it did not permit transmission of PII onto public networks, we ask VA to reexamine its email filtering security software and other encryption controls and ensure employees and contractors are trained on how to handle veterans' sensitive information.

VA's portals, including eBenefits, continue to be targets of hackers and others seeking to defraud veterans of the compensation that they rely on for survival. We look forward to the results of your review of the above concerns and whether VA requires any legislative action or additional resources to strengthen Department websites.

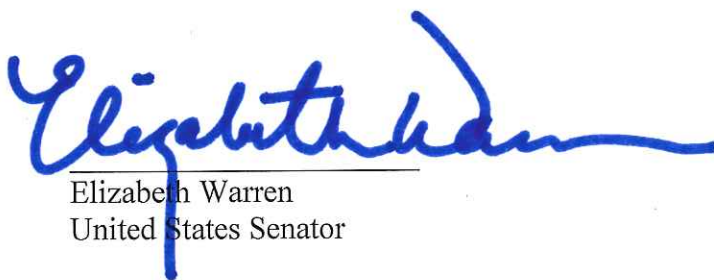
Sincerely,



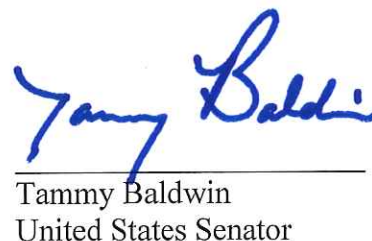
Jon Tester
United States Senator



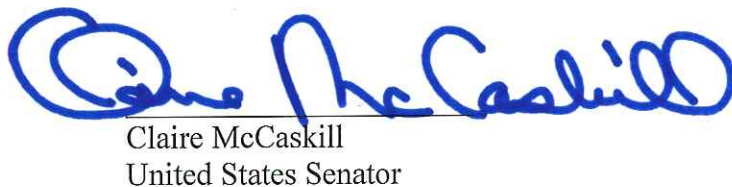
Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



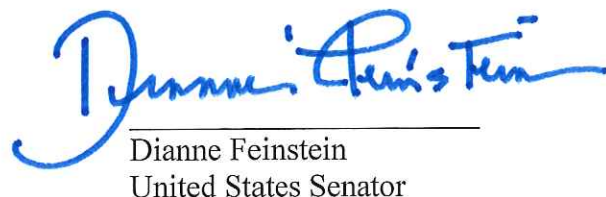
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United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



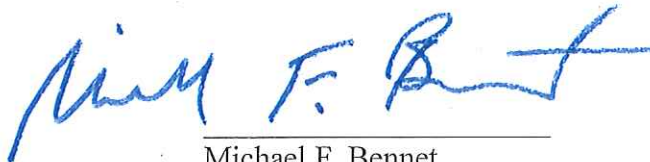
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Mazie K. Hirono
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